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AUTHOR Metzger, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

An informal survey was conducted of high school and college English teachers to examine whether they taught writing the way they actually wrote or by some other method. In response to a question about the piece of writing each teacher regarded as his or her best, all considered the best pieces to be undergraduate or graduate school assignments, motivated by forces other than the self. Most said that they worked under the pressure of deadlines, but unlike students were better predictors of how much time they needed to complete a task and were better managers of that time. This finding suggests that giving students controlled, well-paced, sequenced deadlines is a legitimate and fair method for getting them started and keeping them going. The survey revealed that many teachers did not write with ease and that some disliked writing. Such a confession to students might be very motivating. Finally, most teachers who answered the survey indicated that the circumstances in which they wrote were usually very confused and often involved a great deal of procrastination. It may be a source of amusement and, subsequently, inspiration to students to learn that English teachers, though organized and efficient in the classroom, sometimes generate mass confusion while writing in the seclusion of their own homes. (HTH)

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# Do as I Say and (Not?) as I Do

# or

# How Teachers of Writing Write

Conference of College Composition and Communication

San Francisco, California

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Dr. Elizabeth Metzger
Department of English
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio

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In recent years a great deal of attention has been given to student writers--of varying ages and abilities--and what they do (or in many cases do not do) before, during, and after writing. An equally important area, however, is teachers and what they do, for in many cases when we examine students we may be indirectly examining ourselves, our teaching.

Studying what prospective or experienced teachers do is not a new subject. As you might notice in your handout, studies by Blake (1976), Thomas (1979), Fagan (1980), Combs (1980), Weiss (1980), and Henderson (1980) support this contention. But it is a subject that merits more attention.

Many of us here in this room are teachers of writing--some by choice, some by accident and some by force. And because we teach writing (for whatever reason), it has been the assumption that we do it, willingly and well. To examine this assumption along with some others, I designed an informal survey composed of two broad categories of questions and circulated them to high school and college teachers. The categories were how do you teach writing and how do you produce a piece of writing? (Sample "teaching" questions and "doing" questions are on the handout.) Questions in these categories, I hoped would provide answers to these questions: Did teachers teach writing according to the way they did it or by another method? Is there a disparity between what we teach and what we do? And if so, might the latter merit being used with students?

Before I go any further about the survey, and sample, let me confess that I (knowingly) violated some cardinal rules of survey research. For example, my sample was small and handpicked. I selected people for the sample based on what I had observed of their past behavior--their cooperative spirit. All of us

probably know or have had the pleasure of knowing them. They are the people who do not mind taking the time away from their very busy schedules to do some task--though they may be swamped with papers to grade. They are the people (with or without leverage) who are very good at persuading or threatening others to cooperate, as my contact persons were for surveys I sent at a distance. Being handpicked, my sample did have variance in age, sex, number of years teaching, and type of school that I was after. And because I selected willing subjects, I got back over ninety percent of the surveys, significantly higher than the forty to sixty percent expected return of most conventional surveys.

Unlike many surveys in which the respondent must respond to statements using a "most agree" to a "least agree" format, the questions in my survey allowed for open-ended, written responses with instructions to use additional pages if necessary. I did not want to lead the respondents, to shape their responses, though using "most agree"/"least agree" responses would have been easier to analyze. In trying to provide respondents with leeway in their responses, however, I sometimes frustrated a few as the following quote reveals:

> The questions are good. The amount of time and energy I could have put into answering them is limitless. I could easily have written 20 pages in response and the tiny spaces you provided were very sobering. Did you think I'd be able to answer a question about how I teach writing in an inch?

Although the questions will probably have to be reworked the second time around, the pilot represented areas I wanted to know some answers about and what I thought were worthwhile asking.

Because of the time constraints of this presentation and because I do not want to force relationships where none exist, I will dwell on only a few

questions.

In response to the question which asked teachers what piece of writing did they regard as their best, all of them (with the exception of one) considered their best pieces were written as undergraduate or graduate school assignments (i.e., short to long prose pieces). The stimuli for these pieces came from the outside--the other--not the self. They were not, then, in the strict definition of the term self-initiated and perhaps given a choice (or an honorable way out) they would not have written them. This revelation shows us as unwilling subjects--a great deal of our writing has been done because we had to do it not because we wanted to. We should better understand, then, why our students have an aversion to pen and paper.

Another facet of this finding is the compulsion involved; teachers wrote these gems when they had deadlines to meet, requirements to fulfill. Said one respondent:

> I work best under pressure of a deadline. If I have no particular need to finish something, I usually don't.

Teachers in this sample wrote under pressure all the time, but they consistently left themselves enough time to finish the task and here is where they differ from student writers. As Murray has written, "to avoid the anxiety, students put off work on the assignment until the last minute. When they finally start, they just don't have the time to do a good job" (CCC, 2/77/p.27). Unlike students, teachers in this sample were better judges/predictors of how much time they needed to complete a task, better managers of time, better establishers of personal deadlines.

In light of this finding, giving students controlled, well-paced, sequenced deadlines seems legitimate and fair for getting them started and keeping them going--some schedule when they have to are compelled to turn in something

(e.g., a sentence, a paragraph, a draft, a revision), some schedule that nudges them to complete segments along a period of time rather than the entire product at one sitting where the final deadline overwhelms and possibly paralyzes them.

Another respondent describes other aspects of pressure:

> I need pressure because writing is painful and I avoid it.

Now, here, we have a teacher with twelve years of teaching experience, confident in his ability to handle the language and who regards writing as painful. Obviously, for some the pain/anxiety of writing does not subside with age or experience. Although we are certified and degreed, testimonials to competency, we can not always write with ease. As teachers we have no monopoly on facility. Now think what this means for our students who (by and large) hate to write. A confession to our students about our own difficulties with writing might be helpful in motivating them.

After reading all of the surveys, I noticed a pattern evolving. A common denominator was idiosyncrasy during the writing, though it differed in expression. Take for example these responses to #18 "Under what conditions did you produce the best piece you have ever written?" and #14 "How do you produce a piece of writing. Describe what you do before, during, and after writing a piece?"

> Response 1: Kitchen table with legal pad and medium point ball point Bic between 10:00 p.m. and midnight with lots of coffee and cigarettes.
>
> Response 2: . . . Spreading note cards all over the floor and writing on card table sometimes all night, feeding the last pages to my wife as she sat at the typewriter in the morning.
>
> Response 3: Before--Think. It's on the back burner a long time.

During--Scratch outline to first draft to a bit of editing on a draft and I'm done.

After--Agonize.

Response 4--Before writing I like to clean off the desk and fix coffee. During writing, I spend a lot of time with head under pillow. After writing I crash.

Response 5--I close myself off in a quiet place and chain smoke as I write.

Response 6--Before--waste time.

During--Pace a lot, write a few sentences, pace some more.

After--Indulge myself.

Response 7--I fuss and worry--draft and redraft--consult others--and then finally I get it down and revise.

How surprised our students might be to discover that we, their English teachers, the epitomes of organization and efficiency in the classroom, are sometimes the orchestrators of mass confusion in the seclusion of our homes when we wrestle with writing. Might a sharing of our idiosyncrasies be a source of amusement and subsequently a source of inspiration to our students. Or do we risk destroying the myth our students sometimes have of us--that we can write it once at an orderly desk and it's perfect. Accepting the oddities that accompany the prewriting and writing stages may be necessary for as Murray states "even the most productive writers are expert dawdlers, doers of unnecessary errands, seekers of interruptions--trials to their wives, husbands, friends, associates, and themselves. They sharpen well-pointed pencils and go out to buy more blank paper, rearrange offices, wander through libraries and bookstores, chop wood, walk, drive, make unnecessary calls, [and] nap . . ." (CCC, 12/78, p. 376).

Let me return to one important assumption that the survey challenges. English teachers love to write. I found that we are just as reluctant as our students to write, to expose ourselves to the critical eyes of others. As teachers, we take more comfort in giving assignments (from the safe position at the head of the desk) than doing them ourselves. We have found in our past and present experience just how vulnerable one becomes in print. Many of us, including myself, were humbled when writing a thesis or a dissertation because our egos or some other constraint often got in the way of clarity and we were forced to rewrite until we satisfied some important critics. If we teach writing, but do not write ourselves, we should not be too hard on our students. After all, if we are to be a valid model to them, then it's only fair and necessary to be the doers.

Teachers as Writers
Conference on College Composition and Communication
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Dr. Elizabeth Metzger
Youngstown State University

This is an informal survey of individuals who teach writing or who require it in content areas. The results will be reported at a conference on writing teachers interested in the areas addressed by the survey.

If necessary, use the back of the survey or additional pages to answer the questions. You are not required to sign your name.

Name (optional) _____ Male___ Female _____
Position _____ School _____
Highest degree held _____ Area of specialization _____
Number of years teaching (all subjects) _____
Number of years teaching writing _____

Sample Teaching Questions

1. What courses do you teach? (Please specify the level)

2. Do you require writing in the courses? If yes, what kind and how much?

3. Do you have favorite approaches, activities, etc., you use to teach writing? If yes, what are they and why are they your favorite?

Sample Doing Questions

1. Do you write? If yes, what kind do you do and how often?

2. What kind of writing do you enjoy doing most? Least?

3. What conditions make writing easy for you to do? Difficult for you to do?

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